



**Introduction: Energy and Aging in the Danish Welfare State**  
**Ethnographic Explorations of an Omnipresent but Forgotten Concept**

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# Energy and Aging in the Danish Welfare State

## Ethnographic Explorations of an Omnipresent but Forgotten Concept

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In what ways can the concept of energy stimulate anthropological research on the relationship between aging and the state? This is the key question addressed by this special issue of *Anthropology & Aging*. During the last twenty years, the relationship between “the state” and its older citizens in the global North has radically changed. Whereas the relationship was previously characterized by a paternalistic state, responsible for delivering care to its older citizens in need, the state today encompasses the vision of molding and transforming its older citizens through “active aging” policy programs (Lassen and Moreira 2014). While the programs addressed in this issue are specific to the Danish welfare state, the overall idea of empowering qualifiers of the aging process (successful, healthy, positive, creative, productive), and policies addressing them, is global, but with many different local adaptations (see Lamb 2017). This overall shift in policy is characterized by a movement from a “needs-based” approach, which assumes that older people are passive targets, towards a “rights-based” approach, which encourages choice, individual responsibility, and participation (WHO 2002). While this change has led to a plethora of initiatives and policies focused on empowerment, participation, and independency, it has also reinforced new understandings of aging and old age (Lassen and Andersen 2016; Otto 2013). Amongst these, old age is no longer understood solely as a period of life wherein energy fades. Rather, through the proliferation of programs grounded in neoliberal policy, old age is constructed optimistically as a phase of life where citizens are encouraged to realize their potentials (Mikkelsen 2017): it is a period potentially bursting with energy, which can be activated through government interventions.

Meanwhile, critics have argued that such a “neoliberalization” extends ideals of productivity into old age and invokes a positive/negative binarism with activity and social engagement as “positive” and dependency and illness and loneliness as “negative” (Katz 2013; Macnicol 2015; Minkler and Holstein 2008). In this way, the complex relationship between dependency and independency is neglected, while at the same time passivity and stagnation is pathologized (Katz 2000; Mikkelsen 2016). In this image of the neoliberalization of old age, the state is portrayed as a disciplining force, which—although in subtle ways—shapes its citizens to act in particular ways.

With this background, our goal with this special issue is two-fold. First, we wish to shed light on the way ideas of energy permeate the everyday lives of older people in Denmark and the policy discourses and practices surrounding them. This focus enables us to tell a story of the Scandinavian welfare states, based on their endeavor to energize their populations. Our aim is to explore the underlying conditions within the Danish welfare state where energy emerges as a meaningful emic concept. As a conceptual device, energy enables people to talk about or imagine the invisible forces that govern and prompt action. But, it also indexes the relationship between distinct material agents such as food, the body, technologies, or other material entities and non-substantial phenomena such as sleep and notions of well-being.

Yet, the aim of the special issue extends well beyond the Danish context. Our second objective is to develop energy as an analytical device. Energy, we believe, offers us a novel framework for moving beyond the dualistic images of “old age” and “the state,” since using energy as an analytic lens allows us to explore

the dynamic relationship between the two. We suggest that states, like heat or waves, can be considered as phenomena that may transfer energy from one form to another. Just as heat energy is decided by the difference in temperature between two interacting objects, the transformation of aging bodies emerges as an ongoing and shifting form of movement and interaction in governmental interventions. By using energy as our analytical lens, we become able to shift attention from static and discrete entities such as “aging bodies” or “the state,” to “analogue interrelations” (Hastrup 2014) between entangled phenomena.

We argue that the concept of energy is well suited to understanding the transformative relationship between “old age” and “the state” without dichotomizing them, and without presupposing that the force of transformation can be located in one of the entities. Moreover, the concept of energy allows us to study processes of transformation as constituted by a multitude of factors, such as inner bodily experience, bodily intake of food, relational encounters, or interaction with material or environmental surroundings. Our ambition is to offer a more dynamic and nuanced analysis of the relation between elderly people and the state, as it plays out in the current paradigm of “active aging”—an analysis that does not entail a dualism between activity and passivity, and dependency and interdependency or a simultaneous moralizing judgment on how to age well. We suggest that anthropologists should engage with the concept of energy as it serves as a central, yet unexplored, concept in public health interventions, medical practices, the anti-aging industry, everyday life, and in the life sciences.

## Energy among Disciplinary Fields

As a conceptual apparatus, energy does complex work. First, the concept of energy can slide across different registers and circulate among everyday lives, industry, media, politics, and scientific disciplines. It is a source of power, heating our houses, fueling our cars, and powering our laptops. It is also a source of power generated in mitochondria within our bodies, which enables us to function. It is in the food we eat and it is something that we share, give to each other, and/or receive from divine agencies. It is also something we can experience—typically as a lack in early mornings, after lunch, or when we age, or as plenty when we are in love or when we do something we enjoy. Energy is all these things, and more, and its meanings tend to shift from situation to situation. Sometimes it is something we can store, at other times it is ephemeral and on the move. It slides, shifts, and transforms. Thus, as a concept, energy is “slippery” (Lien and Law 2012) in the sense that it refers to a wide array of both intersecting and disparate phenomena. Even within specialized fields such as physics, one may encounter kinetic energy (stuff moving), thermal energy (warm stuff), potential energy, and so on. And if we broaden the scope we quickly realize the extent to which energy has come to dominate a variety of discourses beyond the academic disciplines.

Within the social sciences the concept of energy has the double character of being both greatly under-theorized, while simultaneously figuring within much writing. In fields such as public health and social gerontology, energy permeates invisible powers such as *vitality*, *vigor*, or *life force*. However, it appears that the theoretical engagements with the concept have, largely, been left to other disciplines. Yet, energy extends far beyond the realm of physics and may be found to describe both elementary molecular relationships and the structure of the cosmos, passing by way of therapeutic concepts of the body and cultural concepts of the soul. This is a metaphysics of movement and order that can be traced through all cosmic levels. Judging from the multitudes of contexts in which the concept of energy emerges, it appears as if energy saturates every aspect of our lives. And it would, then, make sense that the human and social sciences picked up the concept—as we do in this special issue.

The textbook understanding of energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed but only transformed. In such transformation heat is the end product. Energy is thereby related to a particular mode

in which something exists or is experienced or expressed. However, even within the field of physics, scientists disagree on whether energy should be considered a real and objective trait of reality or mainly an analytically useful mathematical fiction (cf. McGinn 2011, 174). Even in the famous equation of relativity,  $E=mc^2$ , proposed by Einstein, it is not clear what energy is. While the laws of its manifestations are well known, there exists no positive descriptive conception of energy. Thus, physicists have struggled with answering the following question: When an object possesses a supposed quantity of energy, how does it differ from another that lacks that energy? In other words, when energy is attributed to a system, then what exactly is it that is attributed? The answer seems to be that rather than seeing energy as a substance, it should be regarded as a conceptual and methodological tool that may be used to, among other things, account mathematically for the relations between distant objects (*ibid.*, 166) and to study the ways things convert or transform (Coelho 2009).

Based on such discussions of energy as an ontological vis-à-vis an epistemological category, it is useful to follow the concept's trajectory into other discourses. For instance, the concept of energy figured prominently within early psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud stated that the libido was the driving force of all behavior—the libido described the surplus *energy* created by human instincts (Zupančič 2008, 21). This was later rejected by Jacques Lacan who believed that energy as a scientific concept could not be transmitted to the area of the human psyche:

Because energy is not a substance, which, for example, improves or goes sour with age; it is a numerical constant that a physicist has to find in his [*sic*] calculations, so as to be able to work [...] Each and every physicist knows clearly, that is to say, in a readily articulated manner, that energy is nothing other than the numerical value of a constant. Now what Freud articulates as a primary process in the unconscious [...] isn't something to be numerically expressed [...] (1990, 18).

Yet, in spite of Lacan's critical comment about the misuse of the concept of energy beyond the realm of physics, it seems clear that there has been an ongoing exchange of ideas between western scientific discourse and numerous other fields—an exchange which, from an ethnographic perspective, should not be ignored. For instance, the influential Japanese Zen Buddhist D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966) applied the concept of energy in his promotion of Zen in Europe. Through his lectures, journals, and translations of Zen texts, he presented Zen as a core wisdom disembodied from the religious framework in which it had originally been developed. Thereby he caught the attention of the prominent figures within the psychoanalytic movement, such as Jung and Erich Fromm, whose ideas resonated with Suzuki's statement: "Zen liberates all *energies* properly and naturally stored in each of us, which are in ordinary circumstances cramped and distorted so that they find no adequate channel for activity" (1956, 3, emphasis added).

Within the field of anthropology, the attention to energy can be traced back to Leslie White who saw energy as a critical element in understanding cultural evolution. He believed that paying attention to how societies become progressively more efficient in controlling energy would offer a scientific standard for measuring the progress towards increasing social and cultural complexity. This led him to formulate his famous dictum: "[Culture] evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year is increased, or as the efficiency of the instrumental means of putting the energy to work is increased" (White 1959, 56). While the concept has been largely abandoned for decades within the discipline, it has recently resurfaced as anthropologists have attempted to understand the influence of culture and social organization in relation to energy use and production, responses to energy crises, cultural ideas of progress and equity, and struggles for natural resources (Strauss, Rupp, and Love 2013).

In contrast to such approaches, which attempt to adopt a “scientific” notion of energy, the underlying idea that guides our approach is that while the scientific energy paradigm accounts for physical phenomena such as electricity and heat transfer, it dismisses other less tangible ones, that is, those that are not quantifiable or measurable according to the standards of western science. We consider it crucial to recognize that energy has come to form a relationship between scientific and popular consciousness. This relationship is bilateral in the sense that while scientific discourse today permeates the everyday vocabulary beyond university, the layperson’s understanding of energy also feeds back into academia and may affect the ways in which scientific researchers talk about energy. This insight is important since it makes us aware of the fact that energy cannot be isolated as a stable, analytical concept. Rather, as an invisible force, energy becomes meaningful to people within the immediate social and cultural context of their lives and is often understood and explained through a multitude of coexistent, overlapping theories and ideas (Rupp 2013). Being constantly applied to new contexts, energy as a concept undergoes an evolution of meaning. Arguably, this elusiveness of the concept in combination with people’s subjective, bodily familiarity with (especially a lack of) energy has enabled the concept to traverse a broad range of fields, including the Danish welfare state, as we discuss in the following section.

## The Danish Context

The contributions to this special issue derive from research conducted in the Danish research institution Center for Healthy Aging. As such, the closely-knit Danish welfare state is the broader frame of the aging lives and the interventions explored. This ethnographic context is particular in terms of the close relations and trust between citizen and state and the public funding used to form processes of aging (Lassen and Jespersen 2017; Nørtoft 2013). But the insights generated from this specific national context tell a more general tale about the “new old age” as a period of life with immense moral, political and economic interests attached to it and how “energizing old age” is both a political ambition and a subjective endeavor of the older citizens.

Said to be the happiest country on earth in a range of quasi-scientific international happiness surveys, Denmark is a welfare state in the Scandinavian tradition. This entails high taxes on income and trade on the one hand, and universal welfare services such as public school, public education, social services, unemployment benefits, retirement benefits, and healthcare on the other (Jöhncke 2007). This relation between state and citizen also entails that very few older people live with their children, and that home care is provided by the municipalities rather than by the family, but that the family is still generally involved in the lives of their older relatives (Stuart and Hansen 2009).

The rise of the Danish welfare state can be seen as a response to the international politics and specific conditions of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. When Europe was re-constructed after the Second World War, the welfare state was enabled by both international economic aid (The Marshall Plan) and two decades of economic boom in Europe, as well as a national endeavor to defend itself from potential outside forces through a coherent society. A part of this endeavor is the idea that the state needs to intervene actively in the lives of its citizens, specifically in the social, health, and educational spheres, in order to promote the collective interests of all social groups. One of the key ideals promoted by the welfare state is equality, economic as well as social, ensured by universal rights (Busck and Poulsen, 2002). As such, the welfare state developed a closely-knit society, which enabled a high level of education and security, and through this, maintained the larger part of the workers’ movement as supporters of the Social Democratic Party and the welfare state model. In this way, the welfare state was also a defence against the communists and the revolutionary ideas coming from the east. As part of this development through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state became omnipresent in the provision of services for its aging workers and citizens.



In line with other Western European health and welfare systems, the Danish health system has been undergoing a continuous reform process since the 1980s, going towards decentralization and a simultaneous process of recentralization through increased use of economic incentives and privatization—a process often labeled as “new public management” (Andersen and Jensen 2010). Denmark is inhabited by 6 million persons and divided into 5 regions, which are mainly responsible for hospital management (secondary and tertiary care) and into 98 smaller municipalities, which are mainly responsible for health promotion and primary care. In response to the challenges of an increasing aging population and the need to control rising costs, a radical local government reform in 2007 gave the municipalities extended tasks in care and in the fields of prevention and health promotion. In the last decade, therefore, we have seen a rise of municipal initiatives designed to promote a revitalization of the everyday lives of older people. This is done through various initiatives, such as preventive home visits (Ludvigsen 2014; Otto 2013), physical rehabilitation programs (Schwennesen 2017), everyday re-ablement programs (Christensen 2017a, 2017b), municipal activity centers (Lassen 2017, 2014a, 2014b), and the design and implementation of welfare technologies (Ertner 2015; Schwennesen 2016). Hence, the municipality is the administrative body receiving most attention in this special issue.

This development towards decentralization of care and the emphasis of prevention and health promotion as a core municipal task has reconfigured the link between everyday life and the Danish welfare state and enacts a particular form of bio-politics. Biopolitics refers to a change in the political apparatus that occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Whereas territory was previously the primary concern of the state, the primary concern now became the population’s discipline and welfare. To create a strong population was to create a strong state, and this was done through a meticulous interest in, and measurement of, the biological and pathological traits of the population (Foucault 1994, 71). This entailed a focus on the conducts of life, and the shaping of the population through disciplines such as statistics, medicine, and education.

The rise of the welfare states during the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as an elaboration of biopolitics, which is closely connected to the idea of disease as an “unfolding, long, continuous event” (Moreira 2009, 33). When the etiologies of diseases change into a long unfolding process, the need for prediction and prevention arises, and hence, the need for a closely-knit welfare state with branches of healthcare and prevention programs alongside research techniques, such as longitudinal studies enabling an understanding of how to intervene in this unfolding over time. Hence, while prevention programs have, historically, been based on specific risk groups and their statistical risk for developing a disease, today many initiatives are also concerned with facilitating energetic everyday lives. This is a facilitation of a specific version of a good old age, in which the Danish welfare state goes to great lengths to create energy in places you would not expect to find energy—nor would you normally consider such initiatives a task for the state outside of the Scandinavian context.

## Background and Contributions

Each in their own way, the contributions in this issue explore the concept of energy in old age, both as an emic concept we draw from multiple ethnographic field sites in Denmark, and as an analytical toolset consisting of various figures and models of energy used to dissect interventions attempting to energize old age. Indeed, judging from the multitudes of situations in which the concept of energy emerges in our ethnographic material, it appears as if energy saturates every aspect of old age and the aging process. It is this omnipresence that the special issue analyses empirically, theoretically and historically; thereby providing a conceptual framework for the “new old age” in the realm of 21<sup>st</sup> century welfare states.

Our interest in the concept of energy was prompted by a series of group interviews conducted with researchers from a wide range of disciplines within the Center for Healthy Aging (CEHA) at the University of Copenhagen in 2013. That project was spurred by a perceived need to explore how energy was in fact conceptualized by scientists within CEHA considering the prominent role the concept played in the research application for the center to the Nordea Foundation. It had been decided from the outset that “energy” should be a guiding concept for the center, as it was believed that this concept was easily translatable across disciplines and thus provided a shared conceptual framework among the social sciences, the humanities, and the medical sciences. The application stipulated that the objective of the research center was “to obtain greater insights into energy creation and transmission and into how various factors affect the level of energy.” It was thereby assumed that a consensus existed about what various individual researchers meant by the term energy across the various fields within CEHA.

But rather than consensus, the group interviews at CEHA revealed an overwhelming richness of different conceptions. Each group consisted of three to five participants, and the interviewer would ask the participants to explain and discuss their understandings of energy. What became clear was that the participants were inclined to make use of various “folk-theories” and apply hybrid frameworks when discussing what energy is. They combined specialized, scientific notions of energy with lay ideas, and this switching back and forth between various registers enabled a form of interdisciplinary conversation to take place. While a few participants attempted to define energy in bio-chemical terms, they soon after switched to almost existential terms by, for instance, talking about the importance of having the energy to deal with one’s life. Thus, an oscillation took place between an understanding of energy as “what takes place within a cell” and energy as something almost mystical. The interviewed thereby switched between what has been termed formalist and substantivist models (Rupp 2013, 80). The formalist model refers to quantifiable, technical systems of energy, while the substantivist model, which was by far most prevalent in the interviews, implies a reflection on energy as a qualitative, socially embedded force that is mediated by people’s relationships and with the conditions of their daily lives. Thus, in articulating what they considered energy to be—or *not* to be—the scientists at CEHA reached for a palette of images that worked as rhetorical devices and that sought to create a common language across disciplines.

As our interdisciplinary work in CEHA continued, a group of researchers from anthropology, ethnology, and public health decided to use the opportunity to scrutinize energy further. Together with Bjarke Oxlund, Kamilla Nørtoft, Malene Bødker and Marie Ertner, the authors organized a seminar in September 2016 for CEHA-researchers from anthropology, ethnology, and public health, titled “Ageing-Energism: Diffracting Ageing through the Prism of Energy.” Besides the researchers in CEHA, Ayo Wahlberg, Chris Gilleard, Elana Buch, and Tiago Moreira participated as experienced scholars guiding the young research group at CEHA in issues of aging research and/or the analytical frameworks used to scrutinize energy. Over two days, the researchers were presented with a range of different conceptualizations of energy through presentations from a physicist, an engineer, a molecular scientist, a healer, and a qi-gong instructor, as well as discussing their papers about energy, which have been transformed into the articles for this special issue. We are grateful for the contributions of the scholars, energy specialists, and CEHA-researchers, as well as the funding from the Nordea-Foundation, which all have contributed to putting this special issue together.

This special issue brings together four papers that illustrate how anthropological explorations of aging can be enriched through a focus on energy as a conceptual vehicle. Nete Schwennesen examines how bodies are made to move in remote monitored physical rehabilitation. On the basis of ethnographic material, she investigates how bodies, algorithms and technologies are assembled, disassembled and re-assembled over time. By mobilizing Jane Bennets figure of ‘vital materialism’, she directs attention to the agentic capacities of artefacts such as technologies, algorithms and measurements, and the body itself, as a



fleshy-sensual lively force. She argues that attention to bodily sensory expressions and a willingness to adjust and align the temporality of metrics with the temporality of bodily recovery, is needed in order to compose processes that produce bodily restoration and not bodily disruptions. Aske Juul Lassen explores how the Danish municipalities endeavor to reanimate old age through initiatives engaging civil society and older people as volunteers. By analyzing a choir for COPD-patients and an initiative promoting bike trips for older people, he argues that this 'agencement of reanimation' combines ideals of active ageing and new forms of governance promoting active citizenship. Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen studies the category of the "passive citizen," which has become the object of concerted political and media attention in recent years. He offers the argument that the attempt to activate such citizens in fact "energizes" the welfare state. In the fourth article, Michael Andersen provides a medical historical explanation as to why aging and energy have become intrinsically connected. By exploring the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> century disease, Neurasthenia, he argues that the link between aging and energy can be found in the contemporaneous views of a dissipation of energy with old age, and that this had consequences for the views of the aging body as a productive entity.

All authors turned to the concept of energy at a late stage of their research process; none went into the field thinking critically or analytically about energy, but all have found significant conceptual inspiration in, retroactively, approaching their ethnographic material through the lens of energy. The articles show how energy can offer fruitful analytical avenues for anthropological work.

While the papers approach energy in different ways, they revolve around the notion that to understand contemporary meanings and practices associated with energy, we must integrate an awareness of our own anthropological assumptions about energy with critical scrutiny of how the concept operates in the lives of the people we study. We take this as our outset by proposing that "energy" as a concept with pertinence to the social sciences, should be considered a conceptual vehicle that allows us to explore the idea of movement and transformation as well as reformulating the critical questions in relation to health, aging, and the dynamics of the modern welfare state. We thereby apply the concept both ethnographically as an analytical heuristic and as an emic concept. We suggest that energy may both be developed as an analytic concept in social sciences as well as being regarded as an object of study in need of further attention.

Furthermore, "energy" seems to offer a conceptual vehicle for establishing conversation across disciplines. Interdisciplinary collaborations have become the reality in academic research and it seems clear that if we want to ensure dialogue across disciplines, we must develop a vocabulary that allows such dialogue to take place. In this sense, it is important that we do not simply assume dialogue, but that we, rather, challenge and reflect on the concepts that we apply, and that we intentionally and openly discuss the overlaps of meaning embedded in such concepts. This will in itself offer a critical form of knowledge production. On this basis, energy may be useful as a concept across scientific disciplines, to generate dialogue, and to frame research projects and scientific results. As one of the most famously abstract quantities within physics as well as a comprehensive common term in everyday speech, energy has the ability to traverse and fundamentally structure our way of imagining areas of research and understanding the world. As will be visible throughout this special issue, energy is a concept that enables us to bridge seemingly distant phenomena, account for their relations, and explore how they convert and transform through these relations—be it scientific disciplines in interdisciplinary projects, the interrelations between state forms and old age, or other anthropological endeavors to explore the relationships among forms of governance and their subjects.

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